

“Your Daily Life Is Your Temple And Your Religion”:  
The Material and Immaterial Availability of Kahlil Gibran’s *The Prophet*

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## ABSTRACT

Brook Wilensky-Lanford: “Your Daily Life Is Your Temple And Your Religion”:  
The Material and Immaterial Availability of Kahlil Gibran’s *The Prophet*  
(Under the direction of Todd R. Ochoa)

This thesis will use the reception history of the book *The Prophet* by Kahlil Gibran, a short, illustrated book of prose poetry first published in 1923, to question the prevailing characterization in American religious history of the sixties as a revolution in an otherwise stagnant religious culture. *The Prophet* is best known for its popularity in the 1960s, where it acquired a reputation as a “counterculture Bible.” I argue that *The Prophet* is distinguished not by any special affinity for the counterculture, but by its remarkably consistent level of “availability” to readers over time, in terms both literary and material, as demonstrated by two instances in its publication history: the publication and distribution of an “Armed Services Edition” of *The Prophet* during World War II; and the widespread selection of excerpts from *The Prophet* as alternate ritual texts for reading aloud at weddings beginning in the late 1960s and 70s.

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## INTRODUCTION

And an old priest said, Speak to us of Religion.  
And he said: Have I spoken this day of aught else?  
Is not religion all deeds and all reflection? ...  
Your daily life is your temple and your religion.  
--Kahlil Gibran, *The Prophet*<sup>1</sup>

Scholars seem to agree that a dramatic shift happened in American religion in or around the year 1965. Sociologist Robert Wuthnow called it a “consciousness reformation”<sup>2</sup>; historian Sydney Ahlstrom a “moral revolution”<sup>3</sup> and a “time of shaking foundations.”<sup>4</sup> Suddenly, the American religious landscape became a creature of the counterculture, a “spiritual marketplace”<sup>5</sup> more open to new religious movements than to mainline Protestant denominations. The cozy, suburban 1950s vision of Will Herberg’s *Protestant, Catholic, Jew* was bulldozed to its foundations by the likes of Timothy Leary and John Lennon. It is not the existence of such a change but its characterization as sudden that I want to engage with in this thesis. To characterize the 1960s as a dramatic “moral revolution,” scholars must assume a basic rejectionism: young people must have

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<sup>1</sup> Gibran, Kahlil. *The Prophet*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1923, 77-78.

<sup>2</sup> See his book, *The Consciousness Reformation*. University of California Press, 1976.

<sup>3</sup> Ahlstrom, Sydney E. “The Moral and Theological Revolution of the 1960s and Its Implications for American Religious History,” in *The State of American History*, ed. & with an introduction by Herbert J. Bass, Chicago; Quadrangle Books, 1970, 101.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 102.

<sup>5</sup> Also a phrase attributed to Robert Wuthnow.

definitively and exuberantly turned against the “foundations” their parents stood for.

This thesis will use the reception history of the book *The Prophet* by Kahlil Gibran to question this characterization of the sixties as a revolution in an otherwise stagnant religious culture. Though first published in 1923<sup>6</sup>, the book is best known for its popularity in the 1960s and 70s, where it acquired a reputation as a “counterculture Bible,”<sup>7</sup> looked to for advice by young people who had “tuned in, turned on, and dropped out” of more standard religious and social structures. From *The Prophet*, a short book of prose poetry illustrated with charcoal drawings, they read ambiguous aphorisms like “Your daily life is your temple and your religion,” “your children are not your children,” “work is love made visible,” and tried to apply them to their lives.

I argue that *The Prophet* is distinguished not by any special affinity for the 1960s or the counterculture, but by its remarkably consistent level of “availability” to readers over time, in terms both literary and material, as demonstrated by two particular instances in its publication history. First, the publication and distribution of a special “Armed Services Edition” of *The Prophet* during World War II; and second, the widespread selection of excerpts from *The Prophet* as alternate ritual texts for reading aloud at weddings beginning in the late 1960s and 70s.

The latter, countercultural usage of *The Prophet* is often described by readers as an individual “discovery.” If the text was recognized as coming from an earlier time at

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<sup>6</sup> In the 90 years since its publication in 1923, *The Prophet* has never gone out of print and remains under strictly held copyright by the estate of the author, who died in 1931.

<sup>7</sup> The origin of the formulation “counterculture Bible” is unknown; literary scholar Philip Beidler does use it in his history of 1960s reading practices *Scriptures for a Generation*. The term is generally meant somewhat ironically: how could an anti-authoritarian youth movement like the counterculture have something as authoritative as a “Bible”?

all, it was assumed to have been “lost” or “unknown” during that time. As the distribution of the “Armed Services Edition” shows, nothing could be further from the truth. Young couples could very easily have heard about their “counterculture Bible” from their mainstream parents and grandparents. How might juxtaposing the “Armed Services Edition” and the “counterculture Bible,” two readings of the same work, inform our image of the 1960s as a discontinuity or rupture in American religious history?

The thesis will consist of five sections. I begin by describing the more familiar episode of *The Prophet*’s reception history: its very public visibility as an avatar of the counterculture, quoted by the Beatles and Tom Wolfe, packed up in rucksacks at Woodstock, and read aloud at nontraditional weddings. Examples of this usage will come from contemporary print media, literary, and musical references. These references tend to associate the text and its readers with naivete, irresponsibility, and idealism, which is how *The Prophet* acquired a reputation as a countercultural text.

Next, I introduce the “Armed Services Edition” (ASE) of *The Prophet*. *The Prophet* was one of more than 1,000 participating titles in the Armed Services Editions World War II book-distribution project, in which a committee of publishers and military leaders called the Council of Books in Wartime specifically endorsed literary reading as “patriotic.” Unlike the later tradition of countercultural readership, this episode of the book’s reception history centers on a singular object and its circulation. Thus this section will rely more heavily on methods of material analysis, focused on how the Armed Service Edition’s size, materials, and graphic presentation refers back to earlier editions of the book. Success for the program was not measured in military morale, but in the increase in recreational reading habits among GIs after the war. In this respect, and

following the recent historical work of Matthew Hedstrom, I argue that book distribution in World War II deserves more credit for the postwar popularization of “interfaith” and “spiritual” literature than it has been given credit for. The ASE of *The Prophet*, that is, lands the text precisely in that mid-century reading circulation that the counterculture generation is seen to be rebelling against.

With the examples of the “counterculture Bible” and the Armed Services Edition in place, in the following two sections I explore both the material and immaterial factors that have enabled the continued “availability” of *The Prophet* for both patriotic and countercultural usages. Methodologically, I attempt to strike the balance called for by book historian David Hall, between bibliographic and social history; between examining bibliographic and other data on the “production and consumption of books<sup>8</sup>” and maintaining that the ideas expressed between those covers are also “part of the story<sup>9</sup>.” Section three, then, will explore the material conditions by which *The Prophet* was able to remain physically available to readers from its publication in 1923 through the late 1970s and beyond. In the case of *The Prophet*, its production and consumption was heavily influenced by decisions made by its original publisher, Alfred A. Knopf. Unusually, in 1961, Knopf publicly disavowed credit for the book’s success. He claimed that he had never advertised *The Prophet*, and that its exponential year-over-year sales increase must indicate the existence of “some kind of cult,” even while he quietly continued to publish numerous editions and spin-offs of the book, enabling a constant

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<sup>8</sup> Hall, David. *Cultures of Print: Essays in the History of the Book*. Amherst, University of Massachusetts Press: 1996, 180-181.

<sup>9</sup> Hall, David. *Cultures of Print: Essays in the History of the Book*. Amherst, University of Massachusetts Press: 1996, 3.



impression of its “newness.” This kind of commercial strategy ensured the book’s continued financial success without attaching it prescriptively to any one ideology.

Recognizing, however, that the publisher’s and heirs’ financial interest in the book’s continued publication cannot actually guarantee its popularity and resonance with readers, section four focuses on the text-specific conditions that have made *The Prophet* unusually available for a wide array of readerly responses. Since both the Armed Services Edition and the “counterculture Bible” were framed as “spiritual” or “religious” readings, I focus particularly here on aspects of the text that open it to what I call “religious reading.” This section will include some biographical background about Gibran’s expressed religious views<sup>10</sup>, and an analysis of the “ideas” of the text in terms of its basic theology, which combines a romantic universalism with theistic dualism. But this section also makes a different kind of textual argument, focused on the literary form of the book, which is sharply divided between the distinct sections where the titular prophet is asked by an onlooker to speak on a particular topic—Gibran called these sections “counsels<sup>11</sup>”—and the more narrative connective tissue between the counsels, which Gibran called “the prophet’s farewell.” The inherent tension in this form lends itself to an interpretive slipperiness both within and beyond the author’s control.

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<sup>10</sup> Gibran was frequently and adamantly opposed to religious institutions, which he always connected to his childhood in factionalized Lebanon; nonetheless, he received crucial early support from liberal Protestant clergy like Dr. William Norman Guthrie.

<sup>11</sup> Or occasionally, “poetical counsels”; in notes to his patron and editor Mary Haskell he distinguished between “poems,” “parables,” and “counsels.” For some time before the publication of *The Prophet*, he called it “The counsels,” as in a 1918 letter to Mary: “Of course I want [his book *The Madman*] to be a success commercially, for both Mr. Knopf’s sake and for the sake of my next book, ‘The counsels.’”

Finally, by way of conclusion, in the fifth section I briefly consider a third episode of *The Prophet's* reception history, the 2013 animated film version produced by Lebanese-Mexican actress Salma Hayek, which includes a surprisingly astute visual homage to the book's countercultural reputation. That is to say: like the Armed Services Edition, which referred with pride to the book's previous reception history, but *unlike* the "countercultural Bible" reading, which presumes an ahistorical uniqueness to the book despite broad evidence to the contrary, the Salma Hayek incarnation of *The Prophet* acknowledges and celebrates previous readings of the book, because its intended message is not a countercultural one.

Thus a key question emerges from my analysis: why does the "counterculture Bible" reading seem dependent on a sense of discovery, on ahistoricism? Why do the universalist, anti-institutional religious impulses the book fosters seem to thrive on isolation from longer historical genealogies? This question is related to the question of whether and how to characterize 1965 as a "revolution" in American religious culture. I argue that the "patriotic" and "countercultural" readings of the book are more continuous with one another than they appear to be superficially, and that they emerge out of similar factors in the book's material and immaterial availability.

It is my contention that the apparently rebellious and ahistorical usage of *The Prophet* as "counterculture Bible" actually evolves out of its immediately previous incarnation as an Armed Services Edition. In one era, such curiosity was considered not only wholesome and liberal but patriotic; in the other, spiritual seeking was considered countercultural and rebellious. In both cases however, due both to the book's inherent textual form and content, and to the ways it was framed by its publisher, *The Prophet* is

an object that both liberates its readers from the confines of institutional religion, and maintains a comforting connection to that tradition.

## 1. THE COUNTERCULTURE BIBLE

“In the famous Beat Generation HQ, the City Lights bookstore, Shig Murao, the Nipponese panjandrum of the place, sat glowering with his beard hanging down like those strands of furze and fern in an architect’s drawing, drooping over the volumes of Kahlil Gibran by the cash register while Professional Budget Finance Dentists here for the convention browsed in search of the beatniks between tit shows.<sup>12</sup>”

—Tom Wolfe, *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*

Tom Wolfe’s 1968 book *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* hit the pop-culture scene as an innovation in both subject matter and writing style. It inaugurated the nonfiction writing school known as “New Journalism,” which was soon to include Hunter S. Thompson, Joan Didion, and Gay Talese. A hallmark of New Journalism is a shaping of the prose style to accord with the culture or mood of the writers’ subjects. Wolfe’s subject is the peripatetic novelist and provocateur Ken Kesey, who with his group of Merry Pranksters conducted the famous “acid tests” of Wolfe’s title in San Francisco. Wolfe’s style, then, is footloose and fancy-free, verging on the unhinged. But Wolfe is also the consummate journalist, aware of his readership. By the time the book was released in 1968, City Lights bookstore, in the North Beach neighborhood, was already well-known as an icon of a previous cultural movement, the Beat Generation—as witness the tourists in Wolfe’s scene, who “browsed in search of the beatniks,” as well as an incubator to the next one, the counterculture.

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<sup>12</sup> Wolfe, Tom. *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*. New York: Macmillan, 2008, 9.

Wolfe's snapshot of City Lights occurs on page 9 of the book, and is awash in detail that helps set the scene for the rest of the story. There is the Orientalizing language of "Nipponese panjandrum," and a sense of slowness and stasis, of a place that is already so "cool" that they no longer have to work at it. The "panjandrum" betrays a sense of knowing weariness, accepting of the "Professional Budget Finance Dentists,"<sup>13</sup> but still "glowering." But this emblem of disaffected coolness, this destination for urban cool, is doing his glowering "by the cash register." A bookstore doesn't survive more than fifty years<sup>14</sup> without actually selling something. And what is City Lights selling?

The only named item for sale here are the "volumes of Kahlil Gibran." One pictures a stack of books, cash-register height, probably but not necessarily *The Prophet*, by far the best-selling of Gibran's seventeen books. Any book positioned by the cash register has a particular status in the book-retail geography. It is the realm of the "impulse buy," and books placed there are something a customer might buy without much deliberation; something if not familiar then certainly appealing.

The "volumes" might also have been one of Gibran's sixteen other poetry and prose works, some translated from their original Arabic; but in either case the volumes' reputation would have been made by virtue of association with *The Prophet*. Why did Wolfe use the author's name instead of the title? Possibly because he couldn't remember exactly which of seventeen similarly designed titles it was. Or perhaps because the sound of "Kahlil Gibran," in its foreign-sounding vagueness, jives well with the atmosphere Wolfe is trying to create, the one that is interrupted by the entrance of the capitalized

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<sup>13</sup> Wolfe loves to capitalize things and people he is making fun of.

<sup>14</sup> The still-extant bookstore and its publishing operation are known for publishing Laurence Ferlinghetti, Alan Ginsberg, and Jack Kerouac before anyone else did.

Professional Budget Finance Dentists. The volume of Gibran stands in for an Orientalized, leisurely sense of cool in a counterculture that is newly emerging out of an older counterculture of the beatniks. Tourists in town for conventions know where City Lights is, but it's still surrounded by "tit shows" on the streets of North Beach. Besides, it's 1968, and he knows his readers will know who Kahlil Gibran is. To the people Wolfe is writing about, the Pranksters living in Haight-Ashbury and ready to get on Kesey's bus, City Lights is not a staid literary icon; it might as well be one of those "tit shows," messy, exhibitionist, uncaring for common rules of propriety. And Gibran's volumes, particularly *The Prophet*, were easily swept up in the enthusiasm.

At roughly the same time Wolfe was wandering around North Beach, Kahlil Gibran's work was beginning to spring up, as if by mutual agreement, all over popular culture. According to the "Woodstock Census," a survey of 1005 people born between 1940 and 1952 conducted in 1979, Gibran "was rivaled only by Vonnegut as a popular literary figure," which is odd, among other reasons, because Vonnegut was then very much alive and Gibran had been dead since 1931. "Both" figures, the Census notes, "were favored by drug users."<sup>15</sup> Gibran made an appearance on the Beatles' "White Album," most of which was written while the group was on their infamous spiritual retreat in Rishikesh, India, with the Transcendentalist Meditation guru: "Half of what I say is meaningless/ but I say it just to reach you..." is a snippet from one of Gibran's non-*Prophet* volumes, *Sand and Fog*. It's a small phrase, but it would have been recognizable to those in the know. Some saw echoes of Gibran in Kennedy's famous "Ask not what your country can do for you..." speech; the book was said to have sold

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<sup>15</sup> Beidler, Philip D. *Scriptures for a Generation: What We Were Reading in the '60s*. Athens, GA & London: The University of Georgia Press, 1994, 225.

more copies after his funeral. Elvis Presley had been a long-time fan, ever since his Memphis girlfriend re-gifted him the copy she received as a graduation gift. His annotated copy is on display at a museum in Germany commemorating his military service there. Later, Indian president Indira Gandhi would quote from Gibran on international television, and 1970s talk-show host Flip Wilson developed a one-man stage show in which he recited the entire book.

All of this cultural visibility, however, is more result than cause of *The Prophet's* already robust readership. Since its publication in 1923, the book's sales numbers had always been associated with youth. In the 1960s this fact was unchanged. One explanation of the book's apparent increase in popularity during this time comes down to demographics. Between 1946 and 1964, American birth rates skyrocketed. The first "baby boomers" reached teen-age in 1960, right around the time the reported royalties for Gibran's estate also began to rise precipitously.

Soon, it was teenagers and college students who were buying and reading the book in large numbers. In the annual "What They Are Reading" survey conducted by the journal *Change in Higher Education*, college bookstores reported their top-selling titles that were not required for classes. In 1968, *The Prophet* made the list for Harvard, alongside *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*, and *Portnoy's Complaint*<sup>16</sup>. In 1970, it appeared on the list at Ohio State, Bowdoin, and Stanford.<sup>17</sup> Mining information about what 1960s college students were reading became somewhat of a national pastime, "what they were reading" being the most reliable barometer of "what they were thinking." A

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<sup>16</sup> "What They're Reading," *Change in Higher Education*, (May-Jun., 1969), 9.

<sup>17</sup> "What They're Reading," *Change in Higher Education*, (Mar.-Apr., 1970), 14.

1969 analysis called “Current Reading Tastes of Young Adults” synthesized adolescent interests into preferred categories: first was fiction, second was politics, and third, to the writers’ surprise, was “religion,” representing about 10 percent of the books young adults reportedly read. “A third of the works in this field were concerned with Eastern religions, as interpreted by such spokesmen as Alan Watts and Kahlil Gibran.<sup>18</sup>” All of this curiosity was predicated on the idea that there was something mysterious or unfamiliar about what the young people were reading, something the generation born before 1940 did not instinctively understand.

One place this perceived generation gap would get played out was in the college classroom, where students’ enthusiasm for such non-required reading would occasionally leak out. Charles Clerc, a professor of English at the University of the Pacific in Stockton, California, wrote in the journal of the National Council of Teachers of English in 1967 about his efforts to use what students wanted to read as a bridge to what *he* wanted them to read. When his students complained that all the literature on the syllabus was too depressing, he asked them what they would read instead, and published the results as a kind of alternative syllabus of “spirit booster literature,” which he shared in the hopes “that high school teachers particularly, caught in a similar plight, might use” as “a gimmick to produce reading.” He noted that *The Prophet* “remains surprisingly popular among students as a general backbone stiffener.<sup>19</sup>” The surprise probably emerged from Clerc’s own knowledge that the book had been around for many decades;

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<sup>18</sup> Gottsdanker, Josephine S. and Pidgeon, E. Anne, “Current Reading Tastes of Young Adults.” *The Journal of Higher Education*, Vol. 40, No. 5, May 1969, 381-385.

<sup>19</sup> Clerc, Charles. “On Spirit Booster Literature,” *The English Journal*, Vol. 56, No. 9 (Dec. 1967), 1255-1262.



Clerc may have read *The Prophet*, but he clearly hadn't considered it in the category of "literature." His students don't seem to classify it by genre, but in terms of its useful, comforting function.

As the influx of sixties' kids into higher education continued, professors became less patient than Clerc was with their students' taste for optimistic, comforting literature. In 1975, English professor Paul Lewis of the University of New Hampshire responded to the epidemic of "freshman mystics" in his writing classes with frustration. Bemoaning the fact that his students had been brought up "drinking the Lethean pomposity" of Gibran's prose, he presented himself as the last bulwark against the degeneracy of young people. "The present generation of college students is a generation of mystics. Born in the age of Aquarius, they have turned on, dropped out, and tuned in to the great forces of the universe. Rod McKuen is their poet, Kahlil Gibran their prophet.<sup>20</sup>" The phenomena of members of an older generation of professors associating the degenerate "Aquarian" youth with the reading of Kahlil Gibran became widespread; it seems prompted both by a frustration with the hazy, mystical notions that youth brought into the classroom, and by surprise that a book they remembered from their youth was still popular.

The youth of the sixties were apparently being exposed to the springs of forgetfulness at younger and younger ages. In a 1965 essay in the *New York Times Book Review*, writer Rollene Saal notes that people seem to be reading *The Prophet* sooner

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<sup>20</sup> Whom critics choose to pair with Gibran is always revealing of the mutability of his legacy. Like the comparison with Alan Watts or Kurt Vonnegut, the pairing of Gibran with popular poet Rod McKuen is not particularly fair—McKuen hadn't then been in print for half a century; Alan Watts was not actually from "the East."

than she did. Kahlil Gibran had been one of the “earth-moving revelations<sup>21</sup>” of her college years (the others being butterscotch pudding and Yale boys). “In my dormitory there was scarcely a night table that didn’t sport, along with creams and lotions, a copy of Gibran’s *The Prophet*, that pale, mystical face brooding up into the lamplight. And hardly a suite of rooms didn’t contain at least one disciple, spouting over the midnight instant coffee the poetry and philosophy of the man from Lebanon.”

Most of her generation had disavowed the book as a product of youthful delusion, sending “most of those worn, roommated editions...to the charity sale along with the saddle shoes and outsized sweaters.” But that hadn’t stopped a new generation from picking it up—indeed, picking it up perhaps from those charity sales. And now it appeared that “today’s young people, being more sophisticated,” were “discovering” the book in their high school years. She cites an article in *Seventeen* magazine, whose readership is generally of an age younger than seventeen, in which a teenaged reviewer recommended the book highly: “*The Prophet* is unique and just right for clearing cobwebs and refueling weary souls.” Like the professor who described Gibran’s appeal as that of a “spirit booster” or “backbone stiffener,” the young *Seventeen* reviewer sees *The Prophet* as a source of comfort, encouragement, and inspiration.

Interestingly, the *Seventeen* writer also points to a particular way of reading the small book of illustrated poetry that would become crucial to its adoption as a “counterculture Bible.” The book “does not demand that you begin at the beginning and continue until the last page, but rather invites you to read only that small chapter which will satisfy your present need and fill a particular emptiness with understanding and

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<sup>21</sup> Saal, Rollene W. “Speaking of Books,” *The New York Times*, May 16, 1965, pg. BR2

warmth.” Indexical, or topical, reading processes encouraged the book’s incorporation into daily life as a source of advice, rather than as an inaccessible spiritual text that would require mediation. Although *The Prophet* did contain a narrative involving a prophet, Almustafa, returning from exile in a place called Orphalese, this skeletal storyline did not require narrative, continuous reading practices, like a novel would.

It is difficult to determine the exact moment when this popular high-school and college recreational reading became a standard ritual text for reading aloud at weddings. It was clearly categorized as “spiritual” both by administrators and takers of surveys long before this point. A full 10% of the 1,0005 respondents to the 1979 “Woodstock Census” of people born between 1940 and 1952, cited “spiritual or occult works such as *Autobiography of a Yogi*, the poems of Kahlil Gibran, and the philosophy of Gurdjieff as the major literary influences of the decade.”<sup>22</sup> As literary scholar Philip Beidler wrote retrospectively, *The Prophet* “remains for us an ultimate ‘60s curio, the archetype of counterculture kitsch. People seduced each other by it. People got married to it.”<sup>23</sup>

The practice of reading *The Prophet* at wedding ceremonies, which continues to this day, quickly became so commonplace and unsurprising that it was not widely written about. Historian Paula Treckel has said that “Gibran was the big discovery of people in the 1960s, and that got woven into practically every marriage ceremony from then on.”<sup>24</sup> Some of these ceremonies would have been non-traditional, that is, taking place outside

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<sup>22</sup> Weiner, Rex. *Woodstock Census: the Nationwide Survey of the Sixties Generation*. New York: Viking Press, 1979, 53.

<sup>23</sup> Beidler, Philip D. *Scriptures for a Generation*, 75.

<sup>24</sup> Quoted in Graham, Ruth, “Nuptial Matters: How Poetry Became An Essential Part of American Wedding Ceremonies,” The Poetry Foundation, May 7, 2013. Web. <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/article/245922>

of a church context, officiated by a justice of the peace or notary public. The authors of *Woodstock Census* certainly remembered “hippie weddings” as “like a be-in, or depending on your point of view, Mom’s worst nightmare.” Barefoot, robe- or bead-wearing, folk-singing weddings were “counterculture trappings,” but “the restructuring of the ceremony to include ... passages from favorite authors like Kahlil Gibran and J. R. Tolkien...was an attempt to personalize the event and make it more meaningful<sup>25</sup>.” The degree of non-traditional-ness of the ceremonies into which Gibran’s words were woven is likewise difficult to judge. Though the *Woodstock Census* revealed that fully one fifth of respondents got married during the Sixties, “whether in a hippie wedding or not, we couldn’t bear to ask.”<sup>26</sup>

In any case, it is easy to see how *The Prophet* would read as a direct replacement to the Bible in certain respects. Consider a commonly selected wedding passage, Colossians 3:18-20, which laid out “traditional” marital roles in no uncertain terms: “Wives, submit to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. Husbands, love your wives and do not be harsh with them. Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord.” The passage from *The Prophet* that was most often read at weddings, from the section on marriage, was a clear contrast: a more egalitarian, even feminist, vision of gender roles in marriage:

“Love one another, but make not a bond of love:  
Let it rather be a moving sea between the shores of your souls.  
Fill each other’s cup but drink not from one cup.  
Give one another of your bread but eat not from the same loaf.

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<sup>25</sup> Weiner, p. 21

<sup>26</sup> Weiner, p. 22

Sing and dance together and be joyous, but let each one of you be alone...<sup>27</sup>

The language here is carefully gender-neutral, as well as generally guarded. Marriage is great, says Almustafa, but he cautions that the love of marriage should not be “a bond,” there should be “spaces in your togetherness.” Generally in *The Prophet*, there are not only *not* strong distinctions drawn between male and female, but actually a positive articulation of the autonomous capabilities of women. The only named character other than Almustafa is a woman, Almitra, described as a “seeress,” who by the end of the story seems poised to inherit the mantle of prophecy. And women noticed: the book was nearly twice as popular with women (44%) as it was with men (25%)<sup>28</sup>.

It would make sense to assume that *The Prophet*’s highly visible, culturally over-determined presence in 1960s and 70s America was due to the kind of directly oppositional reading that’s exemplified in the wedding-ceremony usage. rebellious, which would in turn make sense for a youth readership interested in turning on, tuning in and dropping out. It wouldn’t have to be a new book for that to be the case. Rediscovered or republished books<sup>29</sup> could just as easily be appropriated for countercultural usages. In fact, how much more mystically appropriate if the vehicle for your counterculture dreams, the way to that new life, is, in fact, *old*?

What readers of *The Prophet* from this period seemed to miss was that the old book hadn’t been *re*-discovered, it had never been lost in the first place. The book itself

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<sup>27</sup> Gibran, 1923, 13.

<sup>28</sup> Weiner, 74.

<sup>29</sup> The works of J.R.R. Tolkien also appeared on college bookstores most-popular lists; Helen and Scott Nearing’s 1954 homesteading “Bible” *Living the Good Life* was conveniently put back in print in 1970.

meticulously performed its own continuous historicity, listing on its copyright page the number of printings of that edition in every year going back to 1923, in much more ornate detail than is usual. (Normally the copyright page would only note when the first paperback edition or first edition by that publisher had appeared, not every printing thereafter.) Even if the words of *The Prophet* apparently read as fresh and inspirational, the book's typography and layout retained a somewhat antique look, as did the author's dust-jacket and interior artwork. But despite this visual continuity, readers still assumed that this was a book designed specifically for their age and spiritual needs, that its history had vaulted specifically over those postwar decades that *The Prophet's* youthful readers associated with their parents, and everything they were turning against.

Instead, *The Prophet* had been the very definition of what historian David Hall has called, in his studies of Puritan print culture, a "steady seller." Well, not quite steady. A Google "engram" measures the rate of change in the number of references to a given term from year to year, as aggregated in its scans of innumerable historical newspapers and documents. And the shape of the engram for the search term "Prophet Gibran" is neither two peaks with a flat line in the middle nor the steadily, symmetrically rising hypotenuse that the book's publishers would claim for it.

Instead, the engram looks like a volcanic mountain range, with not one, not two, but three steep peaks: one in the 1920s, when the book first came out, and yes, one in the 1970s; but almost exactly in between, there's another steep spike in the 1940s, right in the middle of World War II. No rebellious flappers and jazz clubs; no rebellious longhairs in bell-bottoms: clean-cut young people in sensible shoes. Fresh-faced youth

drafted to serve in the Army. The same people whose return home from war would spark the very “baby boom” that the sixties teenagers were part of.

## 2. THE ARMED SERVICES EDITION

“Books cannot be killed by fire. People die, but books never die...No man and no force can take from the world the books that embody man’s eternal fight against tyranny. In this war, we know, books are weapons.” –President Franklin D. Roosevelt, May 6, 1942<sup>30</sup>

Between 1943 and 1947, “Editions for the Armed Services, Inc.,” a project of the military-publishing collaboration The Council on Books in Wartime, printed and shipped nearly 123 million copies of 1,322 different titles<sup>31</sup> to soldiers in the field, in what was the largest book distribution program to date. *The Prophet*, then already more than 20 years old, was selected for inclusion among 39 other titles in series “O,” likely delivered to GIs in the middle of 1944<sup>32</sup>. As Matthew Hedstrom argues in *The Rise of Liberal Religion*, the cultural impact of World War II is both profound and under-studied by “scholars who attend to the spiritual in the late twentieth century.” Instead, historians “often take the 1950s, the postwar world, as the baseline from which to measure more contemporary developments, thereby obscuring the effects of the war.”<sup>33</sup> As is evident from Roosevelt’s quote above, which comes from an address he gave to booksellers in person, the highest American authorities had endorsed what Hedstrom calls a “patriotic spiritualization of

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<sup>30</sup> “A Message to the Booksellers of America,” reprinted in *Publishers Weekly*, May 9, 1942, 1740.

<sup>31</sup> Jamieson, John. *Books for the Army: The Army Library Service in the Second World War*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1950, 142.

<sup>32</sup> See *Ibid.*, 155.

<sup>33</sup> Hedstrom, 3-4.



reading,<sup>34</sup>” in which books themselves are weapons for democracy; and how much more so if the books themselves are explicitly spiritual? What does it mean for this developing historiography that *The Prophet* was part of the Armed Services Edition program?

First, it shows that this book, assumed to be a “discovery” of the counterculture, had actually had its largest circulation in the hands of the people who would become the parents of “children of the sixties.” Before anyone knew what a “hippie” was, *The Prophet* had already been literally transported around the world, in “small, convenient, and economic form.”<sup>35</sup> Secondly, the way in which *The Prophet* became part of a mass, standardized reading program, in which very different titles were consumed voraciously and almost indiscriminately by readers, puts it more squarely in the “stream” of inspirational literature that venerable historian Sydney Ahlstrom noted was to become “as common as aspirin<sup>36</sup>,” by 1960. Historiographically, then, the Armed Service Edition itself points backwards to *The Prophet*’s existing reception history, and forward to the ways in which publishing and reading habits would change in the wake of World War II.

Literary theorist Meredith McGill has suggested that the term “format,” meant in its bibliographical sense as “the relationship between the size of the paper placed on the press and the way in which type pages were laid out and paper was folded in order to produce the signatures or gatherings that make up the text block of the book,” can also be a model for scholars of how to think about the relationship between the materiality of a

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<sup>34</sup> Hedstrom, 140.

<sup>35</sup> Front matter of Gibran, Kahlil, *The Prophet [Armed Services Edition]*, New York: Council of Books in Wartime, 1944.

<sup>36</sup> Ahlstrom, Sydney E. *A Religious History of the United States (Second Edition, with a Foreword and concluding chapter by David D. Hall)*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2004, 1031.

published work and its reception history. “Format,” she writes, “directs our attention to the set of choices printers and publishers make in publishing a work, with the potential field of a book’s reception very much in mind. Format is where economic and technological limitations meet cultural expectations.”<sup>37</sup> In the case of the Armed Services Editions, those choices were made for such a consciously prescribed “field of reception” that the expectations are almost inscribed into the books themselves, and into their innovative production, wide distribution, and quality and variety of titles.

Indeed, it was a decision about the printing format of the ASEs that made them possible at all. Hardcover books were clearly too heavy, but paperback books were still big for the usage the Council had in mind. Philip Van Doren, a former editor at Pocket Books, is credited with the idea of printing the ASEs on magazine presses, which were then running less frequently because of paper rationing, and used lighter-weight paper to lower costs and thereby enable such a large distribution. They were also to be printed “two-up,” that is, two titles at once printed in one “form,” then chopped apart.<sup>38</sup> A rapturous article on the ASEs in the *Saturday Evening Post* noted that this process “leads to some strange juxtapositions. The upper half of a page may contain part of a rip-snorting Western thriller, while the lower half is devoted to an essay by Ralph Waldo Emerson.”<sup>39</sup> Shorter books (including *The Prophet*), were printed in the size of *Readers’*

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<sup>37</sup> McGill, Meredith L. “Frances Ellen Watkins Harper and the Circuits of Abolitionist Poetry”, *Early African American Print Culture*, ed. Stein and Cohen, 55.

<sup>38</sup> Jamieson, John. *Books for the Army: The Army Library Service in the Second World War*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1950, 147.

<sup>39</sup> Wittels, David. “What the G.I. Reads,” *Saturday Evening Post*, June 23, 1945, 91.

*Digest*, then cut apart to make two 5 ½ by 3 7/8 inch ASEs. Longer books were printed on pulp-magazine presses and cut in half to result in 6 ½ by 4 ½-inch ASEs.

Both sizes of ASEs were designed to fit in the hip pocket of a standard-issue Army or Navy uniform, and side-bound so that they could be “sat upon without damaging the spine of the book.”<sup>40</sup> All interior text was laid out in double columns, in order both to fit more text on a page and to reduce soldiers’ reading eyestrain. The color-printed covers, manufactured separately on only slightly heavier stock than the interior pages, were cheaply staple-bound. The upshot of all these choices was that the Council could keep the costs so low—only about 6 cents per copy—that they could afford to give ASEs away to soldiers for free; unlike other officially issued gear, which GIs had to return when discharged. That meant that along with the official program, there was also a robust informal network of trading and exchanging titles among soldiers themselves. But before the ASEs even got into soldiers’ hands, their production was already touted as a patriotic innovation. The *Saturday Evening Post* boasted: “The Nazis, for all their vaunted efficiency, never solved it. The books they furnished their men were so bulky that production was limited, paper and shipping space wasted, and they were a nuisance to men already overloaded with equipment.”<sup>41</sup> The U.S. military would not be embarrassed by such failures.

Many historical accounts of the ASE program focus on the selection criteria and process, which was complex—lists of titles had to go through four levels of approval,

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<sup>40</sup> Jamieson, John. “Books and the Soldier,” *The Public Opinion Quarterly*, Vol. 9, No. 3 (Autumn, 1945), 323.

<sup>41</sup> Wittels, 91.

including separate representatives from the publishing industry, the Council, the Army and the Navy—but its objects were variety and quality. Ideally the selections came from lists of new books submitted to the Council by publishers, with bestsellers being almost always shoo-ins; but nominations could also be made from Army librarians or soldiers themselves. Fiction, especially mysteries and westerns, were far and away the most popular, but history, philosophy, and even poetry had their place. The ASE program did not have an explicit “religious” classification. Books like *The Prophet* appeared in official ASE histories as “inspirational.” In a 1945 article by Army Chaplain Ellwood W. Nance, however, *The Prophet* is listed among “religious titles reproduced in editions of 100,000,” alongside *The Man Nobody Knows* by Bruce Barton and *The Apostle* by Sholem Asch. ASE titles deemed by Chaplain Nance to have “very definite religious, philosophical and social values” included Emerson’s *Essays* and *Grapes of Wrath*<sup>42</sup>.

The Council certainly was trying to boost morale, but more through the *availability* of recreational (non-technical or educational) reading materials than via their specific contents. Heavily illustrated books were excluded for technical reasons, as were textbooks and instructional books. But demand was so high that “all levels of taste were to be catered to within reasonable limits: there must be “good” books, both fiction and non-fiction, for the serious reader, as well as books which the serious reader would regard as trash.”<sup>43</sup> Variety, like innovative printing format, was a point of pride.

This is not to say that there were no political concerns at play. After Congressmen attacked the program as “communist propaganda,” and the Soldier Voting Law of 1944

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<sup>42</sup> Nance, Ellwood C. “Ours Is a Reading Army,” *Publishers’ Weekly*, Feb. 17, 1945, 842.

<sup>43</sup> Jamieson 1950, 151.

prevented political influential materials going to GIs, the Council changed the ASE selection process accordingly. They “employed a reading staff to check every word of all books selected and to note all references to politics and racial or religious minorities—in short, all matter likely to provoke controversy or scandal.” Still, the end result of this screening process was less likely to be changing the text than to reject a book from the program completely, as happened to Zane Grey’s *Riders of the Purple Sage*, which contained a troubling attack on Mormonism.<sup>44</sup> Thus one of the few things we can specifically surmise about the meaning of *The Prophet*’s selection for the ASE program after 1944 was that it had been through this process and judged religiously “safe,” inoffensive to any particular tradition, or indeed to tradition in general. Within the “patriotic spiritualization of reading” paradigm, books and reading were seen as nationally necessary, so long as they played within the new pluralistic framework.<sup>45</sup>

The downside of the ASE’s cheap format was its planned obsolescence, and the material ephemerality contributed to obscuring the connections between the Armed Service Edition and “counterculture Bible” versions of *The Prophet*. If the low-quality paper and high wear-and-tear of Army usage was not enough to render an ASE ephemeral by the end of the war, the distinct cover design common to all ASEs and the text reading *Overseas edition for the Armed Forces... Not for sale* would convey to a civilian encountering an ASE on the home front that this edition was not for them<sup>46</sup>.

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<sup>44</sup> Jamieson 1950, 155.

<sup>45</sup> Hedstrom, 162.

<sup>46</sup> Of course a few ASEs did return home with GIs to become a specialized collectors’ market. They are historically unique but relatively affordable and often heavily used. On my copy of the Armed Services Edition of *The Prophet*, the cover is worn; much of the

However, the design and layout of each ASE title balanced out this ephemeral tendency with a surprising historicism. Every ASE printed glowing reviews or advertising copy for that particular title on the back cover. Whether these quotations were from published reviews or from the publisher's own promotional copy would depend on how long the book had been released in the United States. Initially, part of the point of the program had been to get new books in the hands of soldiers.

But when the demand for ASEs increased dramatically in 1944, and the series increased from thirty to forty titles a month, just when publication of new books stateside was reduced due to paper rationing, the Council had to vary the mix of old and new to keep up. Per forty-title series, the Council would reprint four or six of the most popular books from earlier series, create two or more custom-made anthologies of short stories, and add "six or more publications from the 1930s or earlier"<sup>47</sup>, which is where *The Prophet* came in<sup>48</sup>. Alfred A. Knopf was a member of the publisher's board put together by the Council; nominating *The Prophet* for the ASE program would have been easy. *The Prophet* had already been a steady seller for twenty years. Despite Knopf's later claim in 1961, discussed in the next section, that he had "no idea" how the book sold so well, decisions like this one, that he made, were a large part of the book's success.

Thus there were decades' worth of reviews to choose from for the back cover of the ASE of *The Prophet*, and the Council chose one of the few grand, glowing, critical

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title page has been torn away; and the four center pages have slipped loose from their staples; the marks of long-dissolved tape used to fasten them back in can also be seen.

<sup>47</sup> Jamieson, 1950, 154.

<sup>48</sup> Although this subset of re-published works in the ASE program is generally talked about as a group, the program's selection has been credited with the revival of a previously lesser-known work called *The Great Gatsby*.

accounts, from the *Chicago Post*: “Cadenced and vibrant with feeling, the words of Kahlil Gibran bring to one’s ears the majestic rhythm of Ecclesiastes...” It was possibly no accident that this review referenced the Biblical book of Ecclesiastes. For soldiers not already familiar with the book who might otherwise be deterred by the unfamiliar sound of “Kahlil Gibran,” this comparison to a familiar religious text would have been both engaging and comforting. The back-cover promotional copy also calls the book “one of the most beloved classics of our time,” and includes a lengthy quote attributed to Gibran himself, part of which reads ““I think I’ve never been without *The Prophet* since I first conceived the book back in Mount Lebanon.<sup>49</sup>” As would become typical for Knopf’s publicity of the book<sup>50</sup>, the back cover of the ASE focused on the book’s previous sales record: “The American edition alone has sold over 260,000 copies.<sup>51</sup>” Thus even in this tiny space, the publishers managed to reference beloved Christian texts, the exotic backdrop of Mount Lebanon, and the tried-and-true commercial success of the book.

The ASE’s front cover also referenced *The Prophet*’s history in another more subtle way. Printed in red, with the series number, O-2, in the upper left corner, periodical-style, the cover features the book’s title and author in the same Alfred A. Knopf font on the right, above the requisite legal fine print. On the left side of the front cover is a rendering of a hardcover copy of the book itself, the one with Gibran’s painting

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<sup>49</sup> The *Chicago Post* review is otherwise unknown, and the Gibran quote is uncited. It may come from correspondence with Mary Haskell, or be extrapolated from Barbara Young’s hagiographic early biography, *This Man from Lebanon*.

<sup>50</sup> See Section 3.

<sup>51</sup> The Armed Services Edition concerned less with consistency and more with the impressiveness of the figures. On the inside of the book, in the preface written specifically for the ASE, it gives the number as 270,000.

of the face of Almustafa on the front, and a tiny Knopf logo recognizable at the bottom of the image. Along the bottom of the front cover, the requisite statement: THIS IS THE COMPLETE BOOK—NOT A DIGEST<sup>52</sup>.

Technically, that is true: all Gibran's text from *The Prophet* is within those red paper covers. One imagines that the short length of *The Prophet*—Gibran referred to it as his “little book”—was a point in its favor in the selection process. However, it is actually a complete version of the “pocket edition,” a 4x4-inch leather-bound edition first published by Knopf in the 1920s. That edition, liked the Armed Services Edition, simply dispensed with all the interior artwork.

So the Armed Services Edition *is* a complete version of *The Prophet*, but not of the version that is depicted on its own front cover. (The pocket edition has just the giant typology of “The Prophet” on the dust jacket, not the face of Almustafa reproduced on the ASE.) But the regular edition depicted on the Armed Services Edition would have been the more commonly recognizable one in 1944. This kind of astute referentialism is somewhat surprising. The tiny book was meant to be read by soldiers on the go and then to be easily tossed away. It had its interior text awkwardly set in double columns that make Gibran's line breaks unintelligible, and allow no section breaks between “counsels.” My copy is hastily trimmed along the bottom so that the running heads and feet giving the author's name and title are sometimes cut off. Yet the Armed Services Edition still manages to reference a longer reading tradition, one that values the book-as-object represented by the hardcover edition, then already a “beloved classic.”

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<sup>52</sup> Every ASE carried a notification of whether the book was complete, as most of the titles were, or whether, in rare cases, the work had been abridged.



This allusion, however, is not surprising when considered that part of the Council's overall purpose in distributing books to soldiers was not to sell books, per se, but to cultivate readers. This distinction was partly a rhetorical way for the publishing industry not to appear inappropriately self-promoting of its specific titles during a time of national trial; but to the extent that the results of the ASE program have been measured, they are measured in terms of reading.

Innovation was prized not only in production, but in reading methodology. In the case of ASE shortages, soldiers reportedly tore books in half so that they could be shared; more organized commanders created ad-hoc library check-out services for ASEs, or insisted that ASEs be read aloud in order to entertain more soldiers per book.

Contemporary magazine accounts and soldiers' correspondence emphasize the eagerness with which soldiers snapped up, read, and exchanged ASEs, often describing this eagerness as "hunger," or "lust," or "the rule of grab." Books were compared to chocolate, cigarettes, and pin-up girls. Titles were only important to the extent that soldiers had heard of them or that they sounded like they might be racy (sometimes they were; sometimes soldiers were disappointed). Discrimination wasn't the point, consumption was. A breathless description by a war correspondent for the *Saturday Evening Post* will serve: "At one point on the Italian battle front, several score [of ASEs] were brought right up to the front line. Word passed swiftly that the books had arrived, and begrimed and red-eyed men came crawling on their bellies from their foxholes to get them."<sup>53</sup> Chaplain Nance contended that there was a particular demand for religious titles. Noting that soldiers at his particular base, Fort Devens, had many additional sources of

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<sup>53</sup> Wittels, 91.

religious reading material other than the ASEs, demand was not entirely being met:

“Though we have made considerable progress, there is still a great need for briefer and brighter books on religion”; briefer and brighter would certainly describe *The Prophet*. “In their religious reading,” Nance wrote, soldiers “prefer a book that is written in non-technical language and that reaches its goal in less than 150 pages.” Many were “seeking information as well as comfort,<sup>54</sup>” expediency was of primary concern.

Long after the foxholes, this eagerness for quick but inspirational reading would persist. The huge increase in distribution, sales, and consumption that the ASE program provided would soon move back to civilian life. Incredibly, the total dollar value of books sold in the United States doubled from 1939 to 1945<sup>55</sup>. What happened in books in general happened even more so for religious books; their sales figures “swelled beyond the astounding growth in overall book sales, an increase far surpassing even the renaissance years of the 1920s<sup>56</sup>.”

Beyond just quantity, however, was a qualitative change in what kind of religious books this new paperback readership was reading. And that was: anything and everything. “For the first time, in the years after the war ordinary Americans looking for spiritual enlightenment in mass-market books turned, not reluctantly but eagerly, to authors from other traditions of faith.<sup>57</sup>” “Spiritual openness<sup>58</sup>” had been common among

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<sup>54</sup> Nance, Ellwood C. “Ours Is a Reading Army,” *Publishers’ Weekly*, February 17, 1945, 841.

<sup>55</sup> Hedstrom, 118.

<sup>56</sup> Hedstrom, 6.

<sup>57</sup> Hedstrom, 204.

America's elite seeker culture for decades, and had been promoted by the Council of Books in Wartime's civilian endeavors, Religious Books Week. Now, via the ASE program, such cosmopolitanism had been "reframed as a moral good and a national imperative." More important for the "moral revolution" of the 1960s was that along with this spiritual cosmopolitanism came a certain level of anti-institutionalism. Hedstrom maintains that the story of liberal Protestantism in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century is the story of a rise, not a decline, in that its victories "flourished beyond the bounds of churches."<sup>59</sup> Beyond institutional bounds is exactly where *The Prophet* had always fit best.

It had in fact been a leader in this type of "spiritual" literature that would soon explode into the world of middle-class American reading habits. Historian Sydney Ahlstrom noticed that these books, "a new genre of American religious literature... created between 1900 and 1960," were "as common as aspirin" in his classic history of American religion. Noticed them, but, like the ASE-reading soldiers and many historians since, did not distinguish among them: "So mighty was the stream of this optimistic inspirational literature, in fact, that it is almost unwise to speak of individual writers; the books seem almost to have written themselves."<sup>60</sup> *The Prophet* had always moved easily among different readerships, and was set to reach a new one in the 1960s. As with the usage of *The Prophet* as a wedding text, the direct impact that *The Prophet* among the Armed Services Editions had on GI readers is difficult to measure. Army historian John

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<sup>58</sup> Hedstrom, 11.

<sup>59</sup> Hedstrom, 6.

<sup>60</sup> Ahlstrom 2004, 1031.

Jamieson did poll ASE authors to see how many letters they had received from soldiers, but this method is of course moot for authors long dead.

There is, however, one intriguing secondhand trace. In 1950, Mary Haskell, Gibran's original patron then widowed and living in Savannah, published a review of a biography of Gibran by his friend Mikhail Naimy. The last lines of her review insist that "These men [Gibran and Naimy] honestly seek the All-Life, the Universal. They believe it can be found. And in this quest East and West do meet: a soldier of World War II told me that he had given the pocket-sized 'Prophet' to 22 of his buddies.<sup>61</sup>" For Mary, the fact that soldiers were finding the book important enough to give away to friends<sup>62</sup> was evidence that it contained a universalized spiritual truth that even the "West," represented by the American military, could access.

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<sup>61</sup> "Kahlil Gibran by Mikhail Naimy, Philosophical Library, Reviewed by Mary H. Minis," *Savannah Morning News*, Nov. 19, 1950, 50.

<sup>62</sup> It would have been easier to come by 22 copies of the ASE of *The Prophet* than it would the Knopf "pocket edition"; Mary may not have known the difference.

### 3. “IT MUST BE A CULT”: MATERIAL AVAILABILITY

“The best selling book we ever published (you may have all heard of it though I doubt if many of you have read it) is *The Prophet*, a book of prose poems by Kahlil Gibran... We have never really advertised it... If people want a book they are just bound to have it.”<sup>63</sup>

—Alfred A. Knopf, in a speech to the Massachusetts Historical Society, October 1961

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“Of all the limp, mucid hooley now being sold without a prescription,  
*The Prophet* is the most blatant and outrageous.”<sup>64</sup>

—Stefan Kanfer, *Time* magazine, 1972

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“Pure gibberish.”<sup>65</sup> —Jonathan Yardley, *The Washington Post*, 1984

At this point it is important to assert that the availability of *The Prophet* to such spiritual interpretations, both patriotic and countercultural, over the course of the twentieth century, was made possible by the continuing material availability of the book for sale to the public. It has never gone out of print, since its original publication in 1923, an unusual achievement in and of itself. Due to the fact that Gibran willed future proceeds from his books back to the town of his birth in Lebanon<sup>66</sup>, and to unanticipated expansion of copyright protections after 1931, the book is still under copyright. Thus there is still

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<sup>63</sup> Knopf, Alfred A. “Random Recollections of a Publisher,” *Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society*, Third Series, Vol. 73 (1961), 100.

<sup>64</sup> Kanfer, Stefan. “But is it not strange that elephants will yield - and that *The Prophet* is still popular?” *Time* Magazine, June 25, 1972.

<sup>65</sup> Yardley, Jonathan. “The Eternal Kahlil Gibran; Never Has One Prophet Done So Little to Deserve So Much,” *The Washington Post*, October 8, 1984; p. D1

<sup>66</sup> After decades of conflict over who should actually get the money, including years where royalties went into escrow while cases were in court, the town eventually formed The National Committee of Gibran, which currently operates a Gibran museum in Besharri, in the Lebanese mountains.

money to be made from it. Its publisher, Alfred A. Knopf, who with his wife Blanche met Gibran in 1920 and published two of his pre-*Prophet* books, also made several unusual decisions that maximized *The Prophet*'s, well, profits. What Knopf did was to stop advertising the book directly, disavow the book's literary quality, and claim ignorance of how it had sold so many copies.

He did this first in a speech given to the Massachusetts Historical Society upon his retirement in 1961<sup>67</sup>. This speech was later extensively paraphrased and quoted in an article in a 1965 *Time* magazine article called "*The Prophet*'s Profits."<sup>68</sup> By then, the mythology of *The Prophet*'s dramatic sales record had been solidified for decades. A *Publishers Weekly* article published in 1938 had been the first of many stories to tout both the book's surprising longevity and mysteriously symmetrical increases in sales: "Even during the worst years of the Depression," according to the trade journal, "sales fell off only slightly... Then in 1935 the sales jumped back to a point ahead of the 1927 figure,"<sup>69</sup> almost as if people had been saving their pennies to buy it.

More than twenty-five years after that article, Knopf expressed wry puzzlement at the number of people who had read Gibran's book: "It must be a cult...but I have never met any of its members. I haven't met five people who have read Gibran." This is one of

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<sup>67</sup> Knopf, Alfred A. "Random Recollections of a Publisher," *Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society*, Third Series, Vol. 73 (1961), 100.

<sup>68</sup> "The Prophet's Profits," *Time*, August 13, 1965, 77.

<sup>69</sup> "Fifteen Years of Mounting Sales: Gibran's *The Prophet*", *The Publishers Weekly*, Vol. 133 (April-June 1938), Issue, April 2 1938.

a number of manifestly untrue statements Knopf made at this point<sup>70</sup>, all espousing a dismissive attitude toward his company's bestselling book, and its readership. The *Time* article mirrored Knopf's attitude, not to mention echoing the tone of the disapproving later English professors: "In a word, [*The Prophet*] seems to provide a philosophy for the somewhat immature, a creed for the vaguely well-meaning, a consolation for those who think religion is a misty feeling."

But that dismissive attitude seemed to do nothing to diminish the book's popularity; indeed, dismissal and disdain would be the most constant note sounded in 90 years of critical coverage of *The Prophet*. Particularly in the 1970s and 80s, well-regarded literary critics for the *Time* and the *Washington Post* expended thousands of words tearing apart a book that had then been in circulation for almost half a century. Why? The disdain is simultaneously evidence of the book's popularity among people that such critics had no allegiance to, that is, young people. Critical disdain was a way of expressing political disdain towards a segment of the population growing in its cultural power to a degree that threatened established media. It was also, quite possibly, another stealth publicity strategy.

In another way of adding to the book's "misty" reputation, Knopf also insisted that "we have never really advertised it."<sup>71</sup> That is also manifestly untrue. Throughout the 20s and 30s *The Prophet* did appear in magazine and newspaper ads. Sample copy from a

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<sup>70</sup> Knopf had, for example, certainly met Barbara Young, whose biography of Gibran he published, as well as Gibran's sister Marianna, who his company faced in court, and some number of the forty-member National Committee of Gibran.

<sup>71</sup> Knopf, Alfred A. "Random Recollections of a Publisher," *Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society*, Third Series, Vol. 73 (1961), 100.

1925 campaign: “Are You Interested In The Serenity—The Calm—The Harmony and the spiritual greatness out of which the minds and the souls of men are born? If so, read...THE PROPHET.”<sup>72</sup> *Time* bolstered Knopf’s mythology, stating that the publisher had “not promoted the book in any way” since the 1930s, “other than making the book available in three editions.” If so, they could only ask, in wonder, “What supports such phenomenal sales? Certainly no effort of Knopf’s.”

It is true that Knopf stopped advertising the original edition directly by the late 1930s, because he had already figured out that readers liked it best if they could continue to think that they themselves had discovered the book. But how could readers keep discovering a book by an author that had died in 1931?

As we have seen, “making the book available” in multiple editions was hardly an inconsequential strategy. Gradually, the publishing house figured out that there were ways to offer customers an experience of “discovery” for an old book. Almost every year they would release either new editions of *The Prophet* itself—including not only pocket-sized, but leather-bound, Christmas-tree-ornament-size, and desk-calendar formats. Several editions of the book specially designed for the purpose of hand-carrying were in print long before non-institutional weddings became all the rage in the late 1960s. Shortly after Gibran’s death, a posthumous series of works “completed by” Gibran’s former secretary, Barbara Young, were released. Knopf also commissioned translations of all seven of his earlier works, originally written in Arabic, as well as biographies,

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<sup>72</sup> “Display Ad 48 -- No Title” *The New York Times*, June 21, 1925; pg. BR31. (ProQuest Historical Newspapers.)



anthologies, and collections of correspondence. None of these sold nearly as many copies as *The Prophet*, but they kept coming.

Along with the barrage of constant “new” Gibran works, the publisher continuously claimed that the book was a bestseller (although it cannot be found on the traditional measure of this status, *The New York Times* bestseller’s list). Although sales figures were frequently announced over the years in round numbers, like the Armed Service Edition’s 270,000, actual figures are difficult to come by, not only for the standard reason that books are sold to bookstores on consignment, that is, with the right for unsold copies to be returned, but also because publishers do not want actual sales figures known; even when they are high, they are never high enough.<sup>73</sup> *The Prophet*’s publishers did, however, keep close enough track of its sales that they could attribute the numbers to current events. William Koshland, president of Knopf in the 1960s, told *Time* that “tens of copies are sold when someone dies.”<sup>74</sup> This meticulous opportunism also suggests that the publisher may also have found ways to capitalize on the use of *The Prophet* as a hippie wedding text.

Although it wasn’t necessary to purchase a copy of the book to use in weddings, the culturally visible usage as a wedding text could only help sales. Indeed, *The Prophet* continued to be visible, even standardized, as a wedding text, long past the years of

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<sup>73</sup> The most reliable figures we have for *The Prophet* come from tallies of royalty payments paid to the Gibran National Committee by Alfred A. Knopf entered into evidence in a series of court cases disputing the copyright ownership. Although copyright holders generally receive approximately 10% of the retail cover price in royalties, it’s complicated to calculate what percentage of those sales would be *The Prophet*, because Gibran by then had so many other titles in print.

<sup>74</sup> “The Prophet’s Profits,” *Time*, August 13, 1965, 77.

hippie weddings. A 1980s wedding etiquette handbook, *151 Ways to Make Your Wedding Special*, suggested that couples use “a favorite short poem or song” on the wedding invitation: “Writer and poet Kahlil Gibran's books of poems are quite moving. It could be quite a fun project finding a poem that expresses what the couple feels.”<sup>75</sup> When Ronald Reagan’s daughter Maureen got married (for the third time) in 1981, the ceremony at the Beverly Hills Hotel was not quite traditional: “verses from *The Prophet*, by Kahlil Gibran were read by a Superior Court Judge Laurence J. Rittenband who performed the ceremony”<sup>76</sup>. And later the same year of Reagan’s wedding, *The Prophet* was used in the first “computerized” wedding ceremony. A mail-order-ordained minister of the Church of Universal Life pressed a button marked “RUN WED”; the couple typed out answers to a series of questions, and “Rev. Apple” eventually displayed a portion from the end of *The Prophet*’s counsel on love: ‘...To wake at dawn with a winged heart/And give thanks for another day of loving,’ before instructing the groom to kiss the bride.”<sup>77</sup>

By the 1970s, Gibran had become a profitable “cottage industry” within Alfred A. Knopf. Indeed, the steady sales and promotions of the book paralleled the company’s rise in the industry. The Alfred A. Knopf label, and particularly its “Borzoi Books” imprint, which includes *The Prophet*, had become synonymous with high literary taste, and would eventually become an arm of profitable publishing conglomerate Random House, where

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<sup>75</sup> Geller, Jaclyn. “The Contemporary Wedding Invitation: A Social Document in Crisis.” *Salmagundi*, No. 121/122 (Winter-Spring 1999), pp. 175-187, 181. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40549113> .

<sup>76</sup> Chrystal, Chris. “Maureen Reagan weds law clerk,” United Press International: Domestic News, April 25, 1981.

<sup>77</sup> “Couples wed by computer,” United Press International: Domestic News, July 24, 1981.

it continues that role today. The company needed its steady sellers to keep selling—profits from *The Prophet* would have hedged the much-riskier prospects of smaller literary works.

#### 4. THE PROPHET'S FAREWELL: IMMATERIAL AVAILABILITY

“Say not, ‘I have found the truth,’ but  
Rather, ‘I found a truth.’  
Say not, ‘I have found the path of the soul.’  
Say rather, ‘I have met the soul walking upon my path.’<sup>78</sup>”  
--Kahlil Gibran, *The Prophet*

The canny decisions of Knopf and his successors to make *The Prophet* constantly “new” and accessible, and to capitalize on both its dismissal by critics and embrace by readers, did much to keep the book available for purchase and in the public eye. But it cannot be said that there was nothing between the covers of *The Prophet* that helped account for its longevity. Throughout its history, *The Prophet* as a text has managed to walk a line between comforting readers and challenging them. It was safe enough for the Army and Navy to agree it would be good for GIs to read on the front, while being just countercultural enough to enthrall “freshman mystics.” To read the book in a way that would make possible both the Beatles and the Council of Books in Wartime requires highly flexible religiosity that is inherently liberal without being radical.

The text often appears to be rejecting the social or religious status quo, as in the negative constructions of the often-quoted lines “Make not a bond of love,” or “your children are not your children.” And yet it does so without antagonizing readers, who still, for example, give it as gifts for christenings and graduations. In this section, then, I will examine several factors that contribute to the text’s *immaterial* “availability.” Kahlil

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<sup>78</sup> Gibran 1923, 55.

Gibran's own expressed opinions on questions touched on in *The Prophet* do play a role, particularly when it comes to religious affiliation: the book has both a clear anti-institutional bent and a definitive theology. I also examine the book's form, particularly the way it is constructed out of two very different types of texts: the aphoristic verse sections that Gibran referred to as the "counsels" and the narrative sections before and after the counsels that he called "the prophet's farewell."

Gibran's own distrust of organized religion was well-established at an early point in his life. Some biographers trace it to his witnessing of sectarian violence in his native Lebanon before he left for Boston in 1895; Gibran and his family were Maronite<sup>79</sup> Christians, then a minority in the Mount Lebanon<sup>80</sup> region where he was born and lived until age twelve. His most meticulous biographers, who are confusingly also relatives named Kahlil and Jean Gibran, relate a tale from 1897, in which the fourteen-year-old Lebanese immigrant declared, upon returning a borrowed copy of the *Classical Dictionary of Mythology* to his Boston patron Frederick Holland Day: 'I am no longer a Catholic: I am a pagan.'<sup>81</sup> Whenever his disdain for the organized religion began, it would last the rest of his life. At his deathbed at St. Vincent's Hospital in Greenwich Village, New York City, he refused last rites from both a Roman Catholic and a Maronite cleric, before falling into a coma, much to the distress of his devout sister, Marianna<sup>82</sup>.

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<sup>79</sup> An Eastern Rite denomination in full communion with the Catholic church.

<sup>80</sup> The area was then part of Ottoman-Empire-controlled "Greater Syria".

<sup>81</sup> Gibran, Jean and Kahlil. *Kahlil Gibran: His Life and World*, 56.

<sup>82</sup> Gibran, Jean and Kahlil. *Kahlil Gibran: His Life and World*, 394.

This kind of firm anti-sectarianism is also clearly present in the text of *The Prophet*, especially in the counsel on religion quoted at the beginning of this thesis: “And an old priest said, Speak to us of Religion./And he said: Have I spoken this day of aught else?/Is not religion all deeds and all reflection?<sup>83</sup>” The God that Gibran depicts is not a god of rules. Whether Gibran knew it or not, the idea that “your daily life is your temple and your religion” had particularly American resonances. Thomas Paine’s post-*Common Sense* manifesto *The Age of Reason*, which got him in trouble for atheism, contained the line “my mind is my own church.”<sup>84</sup>

Still, Gibran wrote far too much about God to be considered an atheist. He was, rather, a universalist and a romantic. More than once he recounted to Mary a daydream of building a joint Christian-Muslim house of worship in Besharri, his hometown in the mountains of Lebanon: it would have a dome like a mosque, and a steeple like a church. He had affection for individual members of the clergy. The Reverend Antonius Bashir, of the Syrian Orthodox Church, would become his Arabic translator. And the priest of Our Lady of Lebanon church in Boston, the Reverend Stephen El-Douaihy, would reportedly drop by Marianna Gibran’s apartment and visit Kahlil when he was in town.

While he was writing *The Prophet* in the 1910s and 1920s, Gibran was hardly alone in his yearning for something more universal and less stilted than organized religion. Reverend William Guthrie of St. Mark’s-on-the-Bowery in New York City, a celebrated early-twentieth-century innovator of liberal Protestantism, displayed Gibran’s artwork and invited him to read his work aloud at the church. A proponent of

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<sup>83</sup> Gibran 1923, 77.

<sup>84</sup> Gay, Peter, ed. *Deism: An Anthology*. Princeton, NJ: D. Van Nostrand Co., 1968, 165.

nontraditional worship texts and techniques, including a “dancing ministry,”<sup>85</sup> Guthrie saw that his church, the ultimate in “establishment” Christianity, had some work to do in terms of reaching a wider and younger audience. He had published, to some disdain from his Church of England colleagues, a volume of celebratory verse called *Leaves from the Spiritual Bible*. (It didn’t contain *The Prophet* because *The Prophet* had not been written yet.) Guthrie and Gibran had an established relationship well before the 1923 publication of *The Prophet*. Still, the friendliness of even such unorthodox ministers towards his work sometimes embarrassed Gibran. “I am going now to a church to read to a large group of people,” he wrote to Mary Haskell on Sunday, May 4, 1919: “May God forgive me for talking and reading so often!”<sup>86</sup>

Indeed, Gibran also took for granted certain basic religious precepts, including the existence of God, or of some kind of infinite power, though what that consisted of was purposely ill-defined. Gibran’s prophet Almustafa repeatedly affirms “boundless” human freedom as an essential human value, but he also introduces limits to that freedom in the form of “God,” or “the One.” God is related somehow to the most boundless part of the individual. In the section on prayer, Almustafa suggests his audience pray the following: “Our God, who art our winged self, it is thy will in us that willeth”<sup>87</sup>. The idea of “the

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<sup>85</sup> For more on Guthrie, see: Wenger, Tisa. “The Practice of Dance for the Future of Christianity: ‘Eurythmic Worship’ in New York’s Roaring Twenties,” in Maffly-Kipp, Laurie F.; Schmidt, Leigh E.; and Valeri, Mark, eds., *Practicing Protestants: Histories of Christian Life in America, 1630–1965*.

<sup>86</sup> Sunday, May 4, 1919. Mary Haskell Materials, Series 2, in the Minis Family Papers #2725, Southern Historical Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

<sup>87</sup> Gibran 1923, 68.

winged self" still depends on an idea of God, albeit an expansive one. The ineffable "winged" part of the self is the soul, and it reaches into heaven: "that which is boundless in you abides in the mansion of the sky"<sup>88</sup>. Even though the "winged self" *is* God, however, it still seems to be composed of both a soul and a body, in the classic, dualist notion, as exemplified in the section on pleasure: "... your body is the harp of your soul, / And it is yours to bring forth sweet music from it or confused sounds."<sup>89</sup> Although the body and soul are reliant on one another, they are doomed to function differently. The goal for Gibran is always unity, to merge what's restless in the soul with the "boundless," oceanic force that is God. He is always concerned with wholeness of the self.

But it's unclear what would happen to the body were the soul to be completely unified with the divine in Gibran's metaphysics. It is important that the boundary between religion and non-religion be indistinct, as if to leave room for possible reinterpretation. The text is perfectly direct about seeing vagueness as a virtue, as Almustafa announces in his final, anxious goodbye: "If these be vague words, then seek not to clear them./Vague and nebulous is the beginning of all things, but not their end,/And I fain would have you remember me as a beginning"<sup>90</sup>. He wants to assure his listeners that it is okay if they didn't understand what he said: This is part and parcel of the text's concern with avoiding too-tight human bonds, regulations, and expectations.

This concern is also recognizable in the form of the book and its juxtaposition of expressive and narrative texts. Every counsel is framed as a pronouncement of the main

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<sup>88</sup> Gibran 1923, 34.

<sup>89</sup> Gibran 1923, 72.

<sup>90</sup> Gibran 1923, 92.



character, Almustafa, in response to a particular request by an onlooker, who with the exception of Almitra the seeress, are unnamed residents of Orphalese, the land Almustafa is passing through on the way back to his home country. They are always introduced in the same way. “A person said, speak to us of [blank]. And he said.” So: “And an old priest said, Speak to us of Religion,” a woman with a child said, speak to us of children; a merchant said, speak to us of buying and selling, et cetera. Almustafa generally speaks in free verse, in second-person command form (“give your hearts,” “love one another,” et cetera). There are twenty-six of these short sections, which are not formally titled on the page, but are listed in a table of contents as “On Love,” “On Marriage,” “On Children.”

From Gibran’s letters to Mary Haskell during the years when he was writing what would become *The Prophet*, it appears that he wrote the “counsels” individually, beginning in 1917, and sometimes revising them for years and sending Haskell multiple hand-copied versions for her editorial pencil. The “farewell,” however, he wrote all at once, and apparently after a long period of procrastination. In a 1921 letter to Mary noting her recent illness and recovery, he wrote: “No, Mary, I have not written the Prophet’s farewell. I, too, have had my physical silences.”<sup>91</sup>

The topical “counsels,” and the handy table of contents, lend themselves cleanly to “indexical” reading, as the *Seventeen* magazine reviewer put it, that one can “dip in and out of.” The “prophet’s farewell” sections are not quite enough story to move most readers out of that dipping-in.<sup>92</sup> The first narrative section, titled in the table of contents “The Coming of the Ship” takes place entirely within Almustafa’s head, as described by

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<sup>91</sup> Friday Jan. 21, 1921. Mary Haskell Materials, UNC at Chapel Hill.

<sup>92</sup> Readers forget that a storyline exists. When Salma Hayek adapted the book into an animated movie, she decided to create an entirely new one, described in the next section.

an unknown omniscient third-person narrator. The second narrative section, titled “The Prophet’s Farewell,” starts with third-person description and then moves into a lengthy exhortation by Almustafa, similar to the counsels, but longer, and without their structure.

But the existence of a narrative, however thin, does contribute to the way the book is read, and especially to readers’ presumptions about the nature of the book’s author. Without the narrative, the counsels would appear to be coming directly from an author “Kahlil Gibran” himself. With the intermediary of the titular prophet Almustafa, the book becomes less of a “religious” pronouncement from a guru or wise man, and more of a literary work with a main character, one that is available for appropriation or representation by anyone, holy or not. They are the sections that teach us, however obliquely, how to read the text as a whole. We are supposed to listen to what Almustafa has said, but not too much: “Think not I say these things in order that you may say the one to the other, ‘He praised us well. He saw but the good in us.’ I only speak to you in words of that which you yourselves know in thought.”<sup>93</sup> (It is worth pausing to reflect that such a transferable idea of “prophecy” is completely at odds with a Judeo-Christian tradition in which the powers of prophecy are available to only a select few.)

That is not to say that readers don’t fuse “Kahlil Gibran” and “Almustafa.” They do, and Gibran biographers have speculated on the degree to which Gibran identified himself with Almustafa (and Mary Haskell with Almitra). Many readers appear to have assumed that Gibran was a spiritual figure or leader from somewhere foreign, like Rumi. Gibran’s own Romantic sensibilities combined with his actual Middle Eastern origins to make an Orientalizing narrative easy to sustain in future decades. As scholar Wail S.

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<sup>93</sup> Gibran 1923, 86.

Hassan has written, Gibran's lack of protest at being characterized as a mystic while he was alive was both "a deliberate and phenomenally successful feat of self-Orientalizing," and at the same time "a logical (if not inevitable) development within his self-styled Romantic trajectory."<sup>94</sup> It is both cynical and authentic.

But from a reception-history perspective it is important that the "speaker" of the counsels or poems is not figured as Gibran himself. The presence of the "prophet's farewell" narratives at the beginning and especially the end of the book, however minimal, seems to hint at the humanity and possible fallibility of Almustafa. His pronouncements are not *quite* being made as direct exhortations on the reader; those exhortations are mediated by a human prophet, and an imperfect, somewhat insecure prophet at that. Gibran's poetry never spawned a fully-formed or organized religious movement<sup>95</sup>, but from the moment of the book's first public reception, it was presented as a creation available for other speakers, designed to have an emotional effect.

Decades of readers have vested both the hazy speaker-figure of Almustafa and the heavily Orientalized legacy of author Gibran with a surprising staying power. Part of both legacies' attractiveness is precisely their haziness. Not knowing the precise provenance of the author or the prophetic credentials of the speaker allow readers more space to find

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<sup>94</sup> Hassan, Wail S. "The Gibran Phenomenon," from *Immigrant Narratives: Orientalism and Cultural Translation in Arab American and Arab British Literature*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011.

<sup>95</sup> He did have one disciple: Barbara Young, his secretary, first biographer, and author of *The Garden of the Prophet*, which she said she "received" from Gibran after his death.

themselves reflected in the words of *The Prophet* without having to commit to a particular ideology or context; and yet still with a perception of mystical authority.<sup>96</sup>

Recognizing that Gibran was complicit in his own Orientalization can become a tool for the continued literary dismissal of Gibran. In the most perceptive of recent critical efforts at reading Gibran, esteemed *New Yorker* arts critic Joan Acocella concluded, essentially, that there was “no there there.” Gibran’s legacy and his writing is just a mirage, an agreed-upon fiction that blows away as soon as we look too closely at it.<sup>97</sup> Clearly, he preferred to remain a mystery, with fuzzy edges like the charcoal illustrations he drew for the book. In the wake of her account, analyzing Gibran is at best ill-advised and at worst dangerously sentimental. What more is there to say?

What Acocella and other literary critics ignore in this analysis is what I have tried track in this paper—the vast, posthumous popularity of *The Prophet*. This popularity is the reason why any and all efforts to analyze or reappropriate Gibran exist, whether we like it or not. The book’s reputation and the author’s legacy have become co-constitutive. So few readers of *The Prophet* know or care that he wrote sixteen other “volumes,” or even that he was Lebanese, or that he had been dead for decades by the time the Beatles quoted him, that these biographical facts can’t be fully taken into account in a reception history. Neither have readers historically cared about the perceived literary “quality” of *The Prophet*, critical opinions on which have vacillated wildly from the *Chicago Post*’s

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<sup>96</sup> The wisps of subjectivity provided by the narrative sections have been surprisingly resistant to attempts by other communities of readers to invest Gibran with an individualized history, most notably the Arab-American community, which has, among many other efforts, been lobbying the U.S. Postal service for a Gibran stamp for decades.

<sup>97</sup> Acocella uses the failed legacy-building efforts of Arab-American boosters to support this argument.

ASE rave to Stefan Kanfer's 3,000-word 1972 diatribe in *Time* magazine. Reading Gibran against standards of literary achievement is likewise a losing proposition.

That popularity, however, can itself be read, by attending to some of the more some of the more significant interventions in its 90-plus-year history of publication and reception, especially including material interventions like its many editions, its historical appearance, and the record of its sales. Doing so drafts a text that, unlike Gibran's literary legacy, is most certainly "there," even if it is indeed difficult to trace. If the Armed Service Edition and the "counterculture Bible" represent two chapters in that longer text, reading them in combination changes how they look individually. Knowing that the parents of hippie brides and grooms read their alternative ritual text in World War II foxholes makes the hippie wedding feel a little more like maintenance of a certain kind of tradition. With the barefoot wedding in the background of the ASE, one can see how a book considered "safe" broke free of its patriotic bounds. The next section addresses how that visibility of different chapters of the reception history has been obscured.

## 5. “ANOTHER WOMAN SHALL BEAR ME”: CONTINUITY

“Forget not that I shall come back to you.  
A little while, and my longing shall gather  
Dust and foam for another body.  
A little while, a moment of rest upon the  
Wind, and another woman shall bear me.”<sup>98</sup>,  
--Kahlil Gibran, *The Prophet*

With this draft of a longer reception history text in hand, I wish now to reexamine the question of the historiography of the 1960s “spiritual revolution” and its reliance on a certain species of ahistoricism that attends works considered both “popular” and “spiritual.” To do that, I will first turn to one more sentence in that larger text of *The Prophet*’s reception, one that by its contrasting example illuminates the ahistoricism of the countercultural reading.

In 2013, an animated movie was released called *Kahlil Gibran’s The Prophet*, timed to coincide with the 90<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the book’s first publication. This film, the first authorized by the book’s copyright holders, The National Committee of Gibran, was the product of years of determined fundraising and producing work by Salma Hayek, the Mexican-American actress whose heritage also includes Lebanese ancestry. Though it’s unclear if the box-office returns warranted the extremely expensive and lengthy production process, the uniqueness of the film is particularly instructive to observers of *The Prophet*’s reception history.

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<sup>98</sup> *Prophet*, 94-95.

I attended a screening of the film at the New York Children's Film Festival in 2013, which included a post-film Q&A with the director, Roger Allers, best known as the director of *The Lion King*. When someone in the audience asked Allers about his experience with the book that the film is based on, the goateed baby-boomer in shirtsleeves let his gaze float into the middle distance and assumed a thoughtful tone. "I was given a copy of the book when I was in college, and I had an experience of ... satori, an enlightenment sort of thing. And then later, I spent some time on Crete..." He trailed off, perhaps noticing that the theatre was full of Manhattan preteens (and their parents), for whom "satori" and "Crete" were presumably unknown words. "It sounds ridiculous to talk about here," he said, "but it was ... very meaningful for me."<sup>99</sup> *The Prophet* was very meaningful to Salma Hayek, too, but in an entirely different way. It wasn't about enlightenment, she told *Variety*, but about her Lebanese grandfather: "To me, when I see the cover, I cannot think of anyone else but him."<sup>100</sup>

Just as the Armed Services Edition has been obscured by the counterculture Bible, that same countercultural reading has tended to be invisible to the Lebanese and Arab-American Gibran-reading tradition, and vice versa. William Shehadi, one of Gibran's major Lebanese-American boosters, wrote that he had been surprised, when giving a speech to encourage donations for a Gibran monument in D.C. at a university in Vermont in the 1970s, a speech in which he quoted from *The Prophet*'s section on giving ("All you have shall some day be given / Therefore give now, that the season of giving may be

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<sup>99</sup> Wilensky-Lanford, Brook. "An Awkward Adaptation of Kahlil Gibran's 'The Prophet,'" *The New Yorker* "Page-Turner," August 5, 2015, Web.

<sup>100</sup> Setoodeh, Ramin. "Cannes: Salma Hayek on Producing 'Kahlil Gibran's The Prophet,'" *Variety*, May 14, 2014, Web.

yours and not your inheritors”<sup>101</sup>), that non-Arab members of the audience came up to him afterwards and showed off the pocket copies of *The Prophet* they were carrying with them<sup>102</sup>. This would of course have been completely normal for 1970s Vermont, a prime audience for the “counterculture Bible,” but Shehadi’s surprise is revealing. Likewise, *Washington Post* literary critic Jonathan Yardley, who devoted several of his columns in 1985 to denouncing the same plan to memorialize Gibran in Washington, D.C., because it reminded him of loosey-goosey New Age theology, neglected to notice or care that the memorial was a strictly Arab-American endeavor; the opening ceremony of the eventual memorial was attended by none other than President George H.W. Bush, who had been invited by Lebanese-American Senator George Mitchell.

So Hayek’s movie broke with tradition by acknowledging, even catering to, that countercultural reading tradition, even if the way it does so is visually awkward, the attempt is notable. As mentioned earlier, the filmmakers decided to largely scrap the “prophet’s farewell” as it exists in the book, and to reimagine it as a more solid narrative, and animated in the rounded, two-dimensional look of old-fashioned Disney movies. This new plot is about a rebellious young girl and her struggling, widowed mother (voiced by Salma Hayek), whose accidental encounter with a poet called Mustafa (voiced by Liam Neeson and based on Almustafa, or possibly Gibran), changes their lives for the better. It draws elements from the “plot” of Almustafa’s descent through Orphalese. This story line takes place on the day of Mustafa’s release, and so the soldiers usher him back down from the mountain to the sea, where he will return by ship to his unnamed homeland.

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<sup>101</sup> Gibran 1923, 20.

<sup>102</sup> Shehadi, William. “Kahlil Gibran, Writer, Poet, Artist,” *ADC Issues #12* Washington, DC: American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee, 1985, 3-9.



But the filmmakers combine this narrative with visual details that make Orphalese look suspiciously like Ottoman-era Lebanon, the Lebanon that the real Gibran actually escaped from. The hapless soldiers who guard the mountain cabin where the poet is under some kind of house arrest wear fezzes, and refer to someone called a “pasha.” And Mustafa is an actual exile, who ends up getting recaptured, imprisoned, and executed instead of getting back to his home country. A military official says that Mustafa’s writings offer “nothing less than a call to rebellion<sup>103</sup>,” and sentences him to death. “I am a criminal,” he whispers to the young girl from his cell. “My crime? Poetry!”

At every step of his doomed journey, Mustafa encounters something that inspires a “counsel”—a family celebrating a wedding, a person selling food, a lively debate, and so on. Whenever he feels the impulse to get poetic, the movie’s whole look changes, and viewers are whisked into a swirling, paisley, countercultural visual space. Each “counsel” was animated by a different animator with a completely different style, creating a jarring, portmanteau viewing effect. Abruptly, eight times, the narrative stops, and a new swirl of imagery appears, in watercolor, or Claymation, or a wash of finger paint, often with background music that makes the words, in a rather hurried voiceover, seem incidental. Though they look radically different from the more Disneyfied framing story, the animated counsels tend to strike the same note as one another. The film appears to be paying homage to that idea of “indexical” or “topical” reading, in which readers can just dip into the book as they wish, and then dip out again. This is, of course, not how narrative films are actually designed.

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<sup>103</sup> This martyrdom narrative follows a longstanding interest by Lebanese and Arab-American custodians of Gibran’s legacy in depicting him as an advocate for his fellow Lebanese—which he was, in a way, although from his apartment on West 10<sup>th</sup> Street, not on top of a mountain in Lebanon; he never fought unfriendly censoring armies.

Indeed, even the selections of which “counsels” to include in the film seemed to give a nod to the countercultural readers: the Lebanese grandfather taking the satori-seeking college student by the hand. They could only fit animations of eight of the book’s twenty-six short poetic sections into the film, but they made sure all the most frequently quoted “counterculture Bible” verses, including “On Love,” “On Marriage,” “On Children,” and “On Work,” were depicted.

There were ample material reasons for Hayek and Allers to make such clear reference to their source material’s most loyal readership, including the fact that baby-boomer grandparents like to take their grandchildren to the movies. But less materially, it seems that the producers felt they could involve those viewers familiar with the book from its counterculture tradition, and still convey the message that they were seeking to communicate—a vaguely conceived plea for tolerance and against censorship. Their cultural mission did not require occlusion of a previous tradition. Though it had its own ahistoricism, rampantly apparent in the new version of the “prophet’s farewell,” the movie tried, as much as possible, to be faithful to the “counsels,” or at least to the countercultural reading of them, which involves difference, individuality, and creativity.

There are aspects of both *The Prophet*’s literary structure and material history that make it unique. But I argue that the apparently rebellious and ahistorical usage of *The Prophet* as “counterculture Bible” actually emerges out of its immediately previous incarnation as an Armed Services Edition. That is where we see the values that historians have attributed to a 1960s “moral revolution” actually take shape, especially when it comes to an increased interest in the “spiritual.” GIs were curious about and even hungry for what was called “spiritual literature,” even and especially if it was not from

their own religious tradition. In one era, such curiosity was considered not only wholesome and liberal but patriotic; in the other, countercultural and rebellious. In both cases however, *The Prophet* is a religious object that both liberates its readers from the confines of institutional religion, and maintains a comforting connection to that tradition. That is to say, the aspects of the book's text and reception that seem most anti-institutional, anti-authoritarian are actually its most "traditional."

Positing "continuity" between separate readings of the same text on either side of the accustomed historiographical marker of 1965 appears counterintuitive, especially so if readers of the "counterculture Bible" would vigorously deny such continuities. Figuring 1965 as a rupture in twentieth-century American religious history has useful explanatory value for certain dramatic social changes. (Drawing longer intellectual lineages for American religious thought has also perhaps become suspect since the undoing of Perry Miller's mid-century "Edwards to Emerson" trajectory.) But in the history of non-institutional or "spiritual" religion, the image of "shaking foundations" serves to obscure more complicated, material connections and inheritances.

Generally, when we situate countercultural religious practices in American history, we do so in more abstract, discontinuous ways, as if there were nothing between Romanticism, Transcendentalism, and Ken Kesey. When Leigh Schmidt calls the idea of "sympathy" between religious traditions a "portal that led directly from Emerson to William James"<sup>104</sup>, the image calls up both continuity and discontinuity—why else would one need the portal? In the case of *The Prophet*, looking at the continuous material and

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<sup>104</sup> Schmidt, Leigh E. "Cosmopolitan Piety: Sympathy, Comparative Religions, and Nineteenth-Century Liberalism" in *Practicing Protestants*, 204.

immaterial availability of a key text in twentieth-century spirituality allows connections between countercultural spiritual reading and its more immediate antecedents.

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